

VZCZCXRO8645  
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #0632/01 1291424  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 081424Z MAY 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1756  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2220  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2525  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000632

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YEARGER/GAVITO  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [MCAP](#) [MARR](#) [EAIR](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MEETING WITH MINDEF MURR

REF: A. BEIRUT 601  
[B](#). BEIRUT 618  
[C](#). BEIRUT 627

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a May 8 meeting, Defense Minister Elias Murr explained how the current crisis in Lebanon developed, focusing on the Cabinet's May 5 decision to remove the Beirut International Airport head of security, Lebanese Army Brigadier General Wafiq Choucair, who is a Shia officer. Murr explained the technical aspects of the wireless video camera and aviation radio, attributed to Hizballah and found near the airport the previous week, as well as his theory about how these items would be used to target aircraft departing Beirut. Murr said that Siniora and Future Party leader Saad Hariri were on board with the removal of the Beirut Airport chief and would follow this "to the end," while noting that Sleiman was disagreed with the decision. Sleiman publicly announced on May 8 that the continuation of the crisis threatens the unity of the army.

2. (C) Murr requested USG clearance to purchase an anti-missile system for the Beirut Airport. Murr believes that USDP Edelman's next visit will be the appropriate time to outline the contours of a Bilateral Defense Committee (BDC). Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is remaining quiet during the demonstrations. Murr dismissed as false reports that the PM's Grand Serail was the target of a Hizballah-planned attack. Murr expressed his support for a public debate on UN Security Council resolution 1559. End summary.

3. (C) Charge, accompanied by DATT and ODC Chief, met with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Elias Murr at his residence in Rabieh on May 8 at 1100.

THE REMOVAL OF WAFIQ CHOUCAIR;  
THE GENESIS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS  
-----

4. (C) According to Murr, after the discovery of a wireless video camera aimed at a Beirut International Airport runway (BIA)(Refs A, B, C), the airport security director, Brigadier General Wafiq Choucair, had not reported it to his chain of command in either the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defense. (Note: Choucair is an LAF officer who was seconded

to the Ministry of Interior to fill the position as airport director. End note.) Murr said that when he had learned of this situation, he had asked PM Foad Siniora and Future Party leader Saad Hariri for their positions on this matter. Siniora told Murr that this was a "trap" by Hizballah to draw the government into a confrontation with Hizballah, but had decided that Choucair must go, saying, "My decision is final."

15. (C) Siniora told Murr, "If you back me, I will go to the end in this matter." Murr pledged his support to Siniora, citing the dangers posed by the camera at the airport to Lebanese political leaders, U.S. official flights, and UNIFIL contingent rotations. Saad Hariri also pledged his support, saying, "At any cost, I am with you on this."

LAF COMMANDER NOT ON BOARD  
WITH REMOVAL OF CHOUCAIR;  
UNDER PRESSURE FROM SHIA LEADERSHIP  
-----

16. (C) Murr said that LAF Commander General Michel Sleiman did not want the Cabinet to remove Choucair. Sleiman purportedly told Murr that he had been contacted by Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, Nabih Berri, Hizballah security official Wafic Safa, and Higher Shia Council Sheikh Qabalan prior to the May 5 Cabinet meeting (Ref B). Each of these individuals had asked Sleiman to not transfer or remove Choucair. Sleiman told Murr that he did not want to this step to be taken. In response, Murr told Sleiman that Sleiman would be perceived as being in a "joint venture" with

BEIRUT 00000632 002 OF 003

Hizballah if he did not support the government. (Note: Choucair has not been forced from the Army; rather, the Cabinet decree calls upon the LAF to replace him with another officer and transfer Choucair back to his home unit. End note.)

DISINFORMATION FROM THE SOUTHERN SUBURBS;  
A RUSE TO SHIFT BLAME TO AL QAEDA FOR ATTACKS  
-----

17. (C) Murr reported that when intelligence officers went to retrieve the wireless camera from the airport, an aviation-grade VHF Vertex Radio was co-located with the camera. Murr surmised that a wireless camera was used so no one could be tied to the camera. As for the radio, he continued, it was tuned to the Beirut tower frequency so it could monitor the incoming and outgoing traffic. As an interesting side note, Murr told us that he had learned that this radio had been stolen from Minister of Transportation Mohammed Safadi's private aviation business office in October 2007.

18. (C) After hearing about the radio, Murr concluded that the camera and radio were related to possible terrorist attacks on aircraft. Murr told us that the LAF G-2 (military intelligence) office located in the Dahiyya (Beirut southern suburbs) had published three intelligence reports in December 2007 and February 2008 stating that they had information that Al Qaeda was planning to attack an airplane at Beirut International Airport. Murr believes these reports are pure fabrications to create future evidence.

19. (C) Specifically, Murr thinks that the reports were fabricated for former UNIIIC Commissioner Serge Brammertz and UNIIIC's use after a possible shootdown of either PM Siniora or Saad Hariri. In this case, the intelligence reports would have pointed to Al Qaeda and not implicate Hizballah. Murr assesses that Hizballah feels it must kill one of these two men to either cause the government to collapse or to have the Hariri family "close up shop" in Lebanon. Murr thinks that Hizballah intended to shoot someone down in the October 2008 time frame when the U.S. administration was in flux due to elections.

¶10. (C) Since Murr believes that the airport is now under threat from shoot-downs, he wants to immediately buy one of the anti-missile systems shown on Northrop-Grumman's website. Murr says this was a matter of the highest urgency for the GOL and the GOL can pay for it "immediately." Murr was especially troubled by the Northrop Grumman website's information that Hizballah has U.S. origin STINGER anti-aircraft missiles.

BILATERAL DEFENSE COMMITTEE (BDC)  
SHOULD MOVE FORWARD  
-----

¶11. (C) MinDef Murr remains fully committed to holding the proposed Bilateral Defense Committee (BDC). He reported, however, that he had not brought up this topic in the May 5 Cabinet meeting and had not yet briefed PM Siniora on this topic. Murr said he would discuss this with him after the current crisis ends. Murr recommended that he and USDP Eric Edelman discuss the details of the timing and composition for the BDC during Edelman's proposed visit to Lebanon. Murr envisages that the Lebanese side will primarily consist of LAF officers and perhaps someone from his Military Room (office) at the Ministry of Defense.

FALSE REPORTS ON GRAND SERAIL COUP  
-----

¶12. (C) Murr told us that the widely circulated reports the previous night of a possible take over of the Grand Serail were patently false. Murr estimates that it was a bit of fear mongering to attract more attention from the international community. According to Murr, the Saudi and Iranian ambassadors were involved in a series of phone calls aimed at defusing these rumors.

AOUN REMAINS ON THE SIDELINES

BEIRUT 00000632 003 OF 003  
-----

¶13. (C) Meanwhile, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun remains sidelined with no participation in the ongoing struggle. Using colorful language, Murr told Charge that he sent an emissary to Aoun and told him that he had "better stay out" of the ongoing problems and avoid FPM activities in the Murr family's Metn district.

STRENGTHENING SINIORA;  
FAVORS PUBLIC DEBATE ON 1559  
-----

¶14. (C) Murr told us that there is a Cabinet gathering later in the evening, but not an official Cabinet meeting where they will discuss the situation due to difficulties getting a quorum. Everyone was waiting for the outcome of Hassan Nasrallah's speech today, scheduled for 1600 Beirut time (0900 in Washington), he said. Murr requested phone calls to help "strengthen the knees" of various leaders in Lebanon. Murr also thinks that the UNSCR 1559 discussions "must be public" scheduled later in the day in New York. With the current crisis in Lebanon, Murr thinks that the international community is focused on Lebanon. As such, everything should be done to highlight the current crisis in the security council, he said, especially since UNSCR 1559 deals specifically with the question of arms and militias.

SLEIMAN LINKS CONTINUED CRISIS  
TO UNITY OF ARMY; OFFERS TO MEDIATE  
-----

¶15. (U) Meanwhile, LAF Commander Sleiman has publicly announced that a continuation of this crisis poses a threat to "the unity of the Army" and that the "absence of a sense of responsibility limits the ability of the army to perform

its national role." His statement continues by calling on Lebanese citizens to "exercise wisdom and awareness" and calling on everyone to find solutions to bring Lebanon out of its impasse. He concluded by saying, "The army leadership places itself at the disposal of all parties to help find solutions."

COMMENT

-----

¶16. (C) Regarding the statement issued by the Army Command (para 15), we see nothing out of character with previous LAF Commander statements during times of domestic crisis and view Sleiman's remarks as recalling to the public that the LAF is a fragile instrument based on religious co-existence. We interpret Sleiman's proclamation of a threat to the "unity of the military" as a threat to the Lebanese people to raise the specter of chaos on the streets if the political leaders do not find a solution to the current situation. Some, however, might read it as "code" that the LAF will not intervene with military force if the situation deteriorates. End comment.  
SISON